

THE BELLA COOLA INDIANS

133 tains. From each pocket between these mountains an ice-cold affluent comes swirling down to the main river. The predominant tree in the river valleys is the cedar¹ which in many cases attains great girth and height. Cottonwoods flourish in places, and everywhere there is an almost impenetrable undergrowth of devil's club, berry bushes, and other shrubbery of almost tropical density. On the lower slopes of the mountains, moss-festooned pines and spruces are the most common trees, gradually becoming smaller and fewer until the barren peaks are reached. The mountains rise so precipitously that their snowcaps and glaciers seem to overhang the valley, a narrow ribbon of green winding far below. The range of vision from the bank of the river is limited by the all-encircling mountains. Here and there a distant vista opens up to expose peak after peak, but on the whole there is a feeling of confinement, in contrast with the open wastes of the upper country where the Bella Coola rises. Mountains, forests, flowing water, these are the three dominant impressions of the country (see Plate 6).

136 The mammals of central British Columbia, although comparatively common, have never been of primary importance. [291] The marten, the wolverine, the lynx, and bears, both black and grizzly, were formerly hunted for their skins to serve as [262] cloaks. Deer were killed whenever possible, but formed a negligible item of diet. The beaver also was prized for its [439] flesh. The skins of moose and caribou were traded from the Carrier Indians, but neither of these animals was found in the Bella Coola area. The mammal of greatest economic importance was the mountain goat, the wool of which was woven into [286] blankets. Smoked goat meat was formerly found in every [237] house and was almost the only flesh available during the [251] winter. Small game was abundant, but seals were a luxury. [262] Neither were birds of great importance to the Bella Coola. [223] Members of the tribe resident near the sea-coast used to kill

¹Appendix C contains a glossary of the scientific names of the flora and fauna mentioned in this monograph.

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quantities of ducks and geese, and the inhabitants of the inland villages sometimes made hunting expeditions to the nesting places of wild-fowl in the lakes of the interior uplands. Although numbers of birds were sometimes killed in this way, they were never a steady article of diet. The same is true of grouse. Always plentiful, these birds were commonly killed, but never in large numbers. 223 [136] [262]

The basis of the food supply was fish. The river teemed with salmon, which enabled the country to support its relatively large population. Spring, sockeye, hump-back, dog, and coho salmon, all entered the river in thousands during the spring and summer, while the steelhead could be caught throughout the year. They were taken in weirs and their flesh smoked for winter use. Throughout the year, salmon was the principal article of diet. Second in importance was the olachen, a fish somewhat resembling a herring, which entered the river in great numbers during April or May. They were taken in purse-like nets,* allowed to rot for ten days or two weeks, and then boiled. The grease was skimmed off and kept indefinitely to be used as a relish for other foods. It was always a sign of poverty if a person were obliged to eat berries without olachen grease. Trout and bull-heads were found in the river, but were not sufficiently plentiful to be of importance. 226 262 [251] [252] [263] [237] [735] [556]

Although no form of agriculture was practised, the Bella Coola used vegetable food to a considerable extent. Berries were abundant; some were eaten raw, but many more were pounded into a pulpy mass and dried in the sun. Cakes prepared in this way kept indefinitely and formed one of the regular winter foods. The bark of the hemlock and cottonwood was eaten, as well as the roots of many plants. In recent years many of these have not been used, so that an investigator is apt to overlook their great importance in early times. Although useless for food, the cedar was the corner-stone of Bella Coola material culture. From its trunk were split out, with wedges, the wide planks which formed 262 [241] [251] [78] 824 322

*See Appendix A for a description of olachen fishing.

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THE PROFESSION OF HUNTER

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[463] Another profession which is entered by means of an ancestral prerogative is that of hunting. Many Bella Coola have validated their right to this vocation, some by confirming names created by their early ancestors, others by legalizing those brought down from above in the beginning of time. [551] One of the latter is *Lelaimkila*, "The Brusher Off," so-called because the owner is such a successful hunter that he can sweep mountain goats from the mountains as easily as an ordinary person can brush insects from a wall. Unlike the professions of carpenter and singer, it is believed that legalization of a hunter's name always brings success to the holder; [555] perhaps because everyone is more or less successful, it follows that whatever good fortune is achieved by a professional hunter can be attributed to the validation of his prerogative. [556] Others, lacking this assistance, may be proficient, but their success never carries with it the social prestige gained by a man who has distributed goods to substantiate the prerogative.

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[177] There is a difference of opinion among the Bella Coola as to whether or not certain hunting methods are inheritable prerogatives. With the introduction of rifles, these have long been discontinued, and no definite information was obtained regarding the social position of their users. Several of the older men believed that the contrivances depended upon ancestral prerogatives, whereas others stated that they were merely individual discoveries which could have been, and in many cases were, imitated by anyone. It seems probable that most of the following practices are prerogatives, although it may be that they are no more than special hunting devices suitable only in certain areas and, therefore, limited to the members of the ancestral family owning that particular locality.

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424 The method about which the most definite information was obtained, was one formerly employed by a certain *Nusyalziq* to catch geese at *Tál-iso*. According to one elderly Bella Coola,

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this practice had been handed down with the name from the beginning of time; another man stated that it was no prerogative and could be used by anyone. The best time for hunting was at the equinoxes, and *Nusgalxiq* always observed ceremonial chastity in such a way that it terminated at that date. Before setting out, the hunter prepared a net of the



shape shown in the accompanying sketch (Fig. 1).

The net was stretched over a wooden framework, about ten feet long and four feet wide; counterbalanced by a long and heavy handle. The whole affair was called, "The House-like Thing." Choosing a still night, the hunter used to set out in his canoe paddled by a number of assistants. *Nusgalxiq* would place himself in the bow with his net, and in the middle of the craft a small fire was kept burning with resinous sticks piled beside it so that it could be kindled into bright flames at a moment's notice. As the canoe was slowly paddled along the shore, the geese were half attracted, half repelled by the light. Unwilling to take to flight, they used to swim around at the edge of the illumination and so were guided into some narrow opening of the shore. Then *Nusgalxiq* would throw his net so that the end farthest from the handle first touched the water and as the latter came crashing down it imprisoned a number of birds. Others, bewildered by the light

and the falling net, tried to fly outwards and were knocked down by the paddlers. These were retrieved at once and the necks of those caught in the net were wrung at leisure. It is said that this method of hunting was almost always successful.

Another *Tāl-io* hunting device which, however, was not transmitted and may have been merely an individual stroke of genius, not an inherited prerogative, was employed to kill seals. The last to use this method was the father's father of an elderly Bella Coola. This man used to go out at night in a

* 756 of these demi-gods of antiquity are favourite themes for stories.
 538 The powers of the later shamans have been far less than those
 [773] of their forefathers, and their exploits have been of a somewhat
 different character. Hence it is possible to divide the subject
 into three sections:

- (1) Shamanism in the distant past.
- (2) Modern shamanism.
- (3) Shamans from the dead.

SHAMANISM IN THE DISTANT PAST

Information on this phase is contained in stories and a few anecdotes which describe the achievements of ancient demi-gods, endowed with miraculous powers of various kinds. The tales are similar in type to those dealing with the granting of supernatural aid to the unfortunate, so that it is in many cases difficult to differentiate them. As might be expected these narratives are not exact. Frequently the teller does not know from what being the ancient shaman received his power, nor can he explain the abilities described, which are different from, and superior to, those with which he is familiar. In fact it is customary to describe any mythical hero as a shaman.

[424] Tales of this kind can be related by any one; they are not the personal property of a specific family. Many of them, that of *Waowal-is*, for example, are well known and are told and retold constantly.

In addition to information obtained from stories, a few isolated facts are remembered regarding ancient shamans. It is thought that various taboos connected with hunting were learnt by them in the distant past. Such restrictions and injunctions were firmly believed in and strictly adhered to until a few years ago, and many of them are still observed. The usual method of hunting harlequin ducks is, or was until recently, from a canoe, with a sapling set up in the bow to hide the hunter, crouched with bow and arrow in readiness; several shamans, however, were able to kill the birds by merely [262] waving the butt-end of a paddle towards them. Such power

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would be of enormous value, since the Bella Coola consider these ducks a great delicacy, and say that their flesh resembles that of seals. In fact, when an invitation to a seal feast is given the words used mean, "come to eat harlequin ducks."

No attempt was made to collect all the shaman stories current in Bella Coola, but the subject is amply illustrated by those gathered, of which the following is representative.

The Adventures of Waowal-is

Long, long ago, there dwelt among the people who lived on the shore of Dean Channel and were partly Kimsquit, partly Bella Bella, a mighty shaman, *Waowal-is*. He was a married man with a son just learning to walk, and an adopted one about twelve years old. One day *Waowal-is* told the latter to fetch water, but the lad was lazy and made no motion to obey, so his foster father kicked him angrily. Whereat the boy cried out:

"What are you hurting me for? Why don't you kick your wife or your partner? They are always sleeping together when you are away."

Waowal-is apparently paid no attention to this, merely saying:

"Stop crying. I am sorry I kicked you so hard. Run along and get the water."

Waowal-is, who was a great hunter, began to get his canoe ready for a seal hunting trip, and told his adopted son to accompany him. The two set off within a few hours. *Waowal-is* owned a stick of which one end contained the power of causing death, and the other of restoring life; he had only to make the motions of throwing this stick at a living creature, death-dealing end foremost, and the one at which it was pointed fell dead. Many seals had been killed by this means when *Waowal-is* asked the boy:

"What was it you said when I kicked you?"

By this time the lad had regained his temper and was sorry he had disclosed what he knew.

"I said nothing," he answered, "but gave a shout of pain."

"You liar," *Waowal-is* calmly replied. "You said that my wife was sleeping with my partner."

The boy, realizing that all was known, answered truthfully:

"Yes, I did say that. I have often seen her doing so when you were absent."

It was late afternoon by this time and *Waowal-is* at once headed back to the village, which they reached soon after dark. No one saw their approach, so *Waowal-is* told the boy to stay with the canoe and the seals

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